



Approved For Release 2007/10/19 : CIA-RDP79T00912A001000010003-5

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**Foreign
Assessment
Center**

Latin America Review

21 September 1978

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State Dept. review completed

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*RP LAR 78-007
21 September 1978*

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LATIN AMERICA REVIEW

21 September 1978

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Venezuela-Nicaragua: The Domestic Impact

The active role of President Carlos Andres Perez in the Nicaraguan conflict is unlikely to have much of an impact on the current presidential election campaign, which is now entering its final, decisive phase. Nicaragua is not a partisan issue in Venezuela, since parties of all political persuasions agree that the Somoza regime must go; differences arise only over questions of timing and the character of the next government in Managua. Whatever ensues in Nicaragua, however, Perez will come with increased domestic support and an enhanced personal reputation, which he undoubtedly will put to good use.

Unlike preceding presidents, Perez is not willing to preside quietly over a lameduck administration. In the waning months of his term, Perez is out to set a record of achievement far beyond his nationalization of the petroleum and iron industries, which was accomplished in 1975-76. Before he leaves office, Perez also would like to settle Venezuela's remaining border disputes with Guyana and Colombia, take an active role in helping resolve other hemispheric problems, and improve the economic plight of less developed countries through a "new international economic order."

A man of monumental ego and volatile temper, Perez also has an eye on the leadership of the governing Democratic Action Party, which is now firmly in the grasp of the aging former President, Romulo Betancourt. Once close political associates, the two men have drifted apart over the past few years over questions of policy and style.

Betancourt, revered as the founder of Venezuelan democracy, has been annoyed by what he sees as Perez' unresponsiveness to his advice and to party dictates. He regards Perez as overeager, impulsive, and politically undependable.

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For his part, Perez has long chafed over what he considers to be Betancourt's political inflexibility. He believes that while the elder statesman's attitudes were appropriate to the political turmoil of the 1950s, they do not accord with Venezuela's present economic and political realities as well as its new prominence in hemispheric and world forums.

Perez is constitutionally prohibited from seeking the presidency for 10 years after his term ends in March 1979, but forced retirement from politics is anathema to him. Although all former presidents are accorded an honorary seat in the Senate, this is worthless politically without a strong hold on the party--as former Presidents Betancourt and Caldera have demonstrated and former President Leoni found out after he left office in 1969. Thus, the only way open for Perez to remain in the political arena is to prepare the groundwork for an eventual challenge to the leadership of his party. The timing for such a challenge will depend on several circumstances, not the least of which is the outcome of the presidential election on 3 December. A defeat for his party's nominee, Luis Pinerua Orda, would almost certainly lead to an immediate struggle to wrest the leadership from Betancourt and Pinerua.

Perez already has a broad base of support among younger party leaders who were irritated at the way Betancourt imposed his personal choice for the presidential nomination. To many in the party, moreover, Perez' energetic personality and "gut fighter" instinct would be a welcome contrast to the current crop of bland and aging leaders. They believe Perez would give the party a needed boost, especially in the aftermath of an election defeat, but also in preparation for the country's municipal elections in June 1979, the first time that local elections will be held apart from presidential, congressional, and state legislative contests. Whichever party wins the presidency, these elections will be an important barometer in testing the Democratic Action Party's appeal after the first 100 days of the new administration.

Perez' decision to address the UN General Assembly on the Nicaraguan situation, unprecedented for a Venezuelan president, no doubt arises from the importance that he attaches to ending the conflict and ousting the

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present government. It also clearly reflects, however, his intention to leave no stone unturned in his determination to remain an influential figure in both Venezuelan and international affairs.

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Cuba's Policy on Puerto Rico

As long as Fidel Castro remains in power, the Cuban Government will not deviate from its dogged support for Puerto Rican independence. The Castro regime has not seized upon the Puerto Rican issue simply to gain leverage in obtaining US concessions on other matters; it is committed to Puerto Rican independence for historical, ideological, and practical reasons. Acting on its own initiative, not Moscow's, Havana may moderate its support for tactical reasons, but will not deviate from its long-term goal of a sovereign Puerto Rico. In the meantime, the Cubans will try to extract maximum advantage from the appeal that the issues enjoys in the Third World.

Cuban efforts on Puerto Rico's behalf are not quixotic. Castro believes his support for Puerto Rican independence can both be exploited successfully at home and bolster Cuba's prestige worldwide. Believing that US influence in Puerto Rico is now on the decline, Castro wants to help continue that perceived slide as a guarantee against a revival of the US political, economic, and social influence that was so pervasive in prerevolutionary Cuba.

The Historical Background

Although Cuban-US relations may eventually function on a more cooperative and mutually advantageous basis, a genuinely amicable relationship is out of the question as long as Fidel Castro is in charge in Havana. Anti-imperialism has been and will continue to be a basic element of the Castro regime's foreign policy for both ideological and practical reasons; in Cuban eyes, anti-imperialism equates to anti-USism. Anti-imperialism is so fundamental to Cuban revolutionary theory that it cannot be abandoned without considerable damage to the Castro regime's credibility both at home and abroad.

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Cuba's policy toward Puerto Rico stems directly from this philosophy, as well as from Fidel Castro's personal negative bias regarding the historical relationship between the US and Puerto Rico. To summarize his own thinking on the subject, Castro likes to quote 19th century Cuban patriot Jose Marti: "Cuba and Puerto Rico are wings of the same bird." He sees no justification for Puerto Rico not having achieved its independence as Cuba did.

It is sometimes difficult for US observers to understand the Cuban position because the Spanish-American War does not loom large in US history, even though it terminated Spanish sovereignty over Cuba and Puerto Rico and placed them under US control. For Cubans, however, it is the major event in their history with, perhaps, the exception of Castro's struggle against Batista. It thus follows that Cubans, especially the well-educated, feel a strong sense of kinship toward Puerto Ricans whether or not there is a reciprocal feeling. Castro's own commitment, for example, dates at least from the late 1940s when, at Havana University, he was a member of the Federation of University Students' committee for Puerto Rican independence.

Because Castro's dedication to Puerto Rican independence originated in his formative years and is now firmly grounded in his revolutionary philosophy, he is not likely to resist from pursuing the Puerto Rican cause in return for US concessions in other areas. He does not view the Puerto Rico issue as a bargaining chip. He may change his tactics or moderate his rhetoric for tactical reasons, but, in our judgment, his goal will remain the same--independence for Puerto Rico.

Cuban Strategy and Tactics

For example, Castro moderated Cuban propaganda during the recent Panama Canal negotiations and the Senate ratification of the Canal Accord, not to accommodate the US but because he understood that powerful conservative forces in the US would use Cuban pressure as an excuse to kill the treaty. In Havana's view, the tactical change was justified because the treaty was a major step toward the realization of a key Cuban foreign policy goal--the reduction of the US presence in Latin America similarly, Castro could be expected to avoid any Cuban

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action--aggressive initiatives in the United Nations, for example--that he believed might prejudice the chances for a favorable outcome of a plebiscite on Puerto Rican independence. (He would have to be confident beforehand, however, that the plebiscite would be a significant step toward independence rather than toward statehood or continuation of commonwealth status.)

In early and mid-1975, when Havana was quietly signaling its readiness to improve Cuban-US ties, Castro had ample opportunity to demonstrate whatever flexibility he might have on the Puerto Rican issue. Instead, he risked a reversal of the thaw by vigorously promoting an international conference on Puerto Rican independence in Havana in September of that year. Cuban intervention in Angola in late 1975 proved to be the rock on which prospective Cuban-US detente foundered, but the Angolan problem had not even appeared at the time Castro was actively preparing for the Puerto Rican conference. In short, Castro placed greater importance on holding the conference than he did on fostering the warming trend in relations with the US. There has been no indication that this order of priorities have been reversed.

In pressing the Puerto Rican issue, the Castro regime is acting on its own and not as an agent of the USSR. Cuban maneuvering in the UN appears to be carefully co-ordinated with Soviet and East European UN missions and enjoys their support, but its driving force originates in Havana. The Cubans no doubt can be persuaded by Moscow to adopt tactical changes in how they promote initiatives in international forums, but the Castro regime would unquestionably resist strongly any Soviet attempts to modify Cuba's basic position. On this issue, the Cubans probably believe they have the Soviets over an ideological barrel.

Havana maintains close ties with the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (formerly the Puerto Rican Pro-Independence Movement)--which has an office in Havana--and probably also provides it with financial support. Contacts are also maintained with the Puerto Rican Communist Party and the Puerto Rican Independence Party. There is little hard evidence, however, that the Cubans are pushing the "armed struggle" line in Puerto Rico as they did in the 1960s. [redacted]

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Cuban propaganda does not call for violent revolution, but neither does it reject it, and Cuban leaders presumably believe that the independence process cannot run its full course without considerable violence at some stage. Moreover, there is no reason to doubt that Havana would resurrect the "armed struggle" line, and even support it operationally, if the Cuban leadership became convinced that it was the option holding the greatest promise. For the present, however, Havana is depending primarily on political rather than military means to achieve its objectives.

Outlook

Puerto Rican independence is no doubt looked upon in Havana as a long-term problem whose solution is nowhere in sight. Nevertheless, the Cubans cannot help but be buoyed with the results of their efforts on the Puerto Rican issue this year in the UN's Committee of 24. Moreover, Havana is probably increasingly optimistic that it can engineer more defeats for the US because the composition of the committee makes it vulnerable to the type of pressure Cuba has been employing. What is probably most gratifying to Havana, however, is the appearance of signs that independence is gaining adherents among the Puerto Ricans themselves. [redacted]

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CUBAN CHRONOLOGY
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1 August

Voice of Zimbabwe radio reports meeting between Zimbabwe African National Union leader Robert Mugabe and Fidel Castro in Havana.

Foreign Minister Malmierca received by Bulgarian President Zhivkov in Sofia. Malmierca stays in Bulgaria through 4 August.

2 August

Name of Isle of Pines is officially changed to Isle of Youth by order of the People's National Assembly.

4 August

The London Observer reports Cuban troops have been sent to Uganda.

4-8 August

Foreign Minister Malmierca visits Czechoslovakia.

5 August

Government delegation headed by Vice President Flavio Bravo arrives in Bogota, Colombia, to attend inauguration of President Turbay.

Public Health Minister Jose Gutierrez announces at a press conference that Cuba has 13,000 doctors assisting 20 countries of Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean.

Fidel Castro gives closing speech to delegates attending World Youth Festival in Havana.

7 August

Sam Nujoma, head of South-West Africa People's Organization gives press conference in Havana.

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8 August Authorized sources in Havana deny European press reports of Cuban troops in Uganda.

8-13 August Foreign Minister Malmierca visits Hungary.

13 August Foreign Minister Malmierca heads delegation attending UN conference on racism in Geneva, Switzerland.

13-21 August Cuban Communist Party delegation visits Aden, Yemen, at the invitation of the government.

17 August Honduran trade delegation headed by Deputy Economics Minister Miguel Bendick arrives in Cuba.

18 August First Deputy Higher Education Minister Benito Perez announces in Luanda an increase in educational cooperation between Cuba and Angola.

In UN Decolonization Committee Cuba calls for removal of US bases from Guantanamo and Puerto Rico.

21 August In an interview with a Colombian newspaper Fidel Castro says "Cuba has not forgotten the Latin American countries, but Africa needs us much more."

First Deputy Higher Education Minister Perez arrives in Maputo, Mozambique.

22 August Foreign Minister Malmierca meets Spanish Foreign Minister Oreja in Madrid.

25 August Official sources in Havana deny press reports of transfer of Cuban troops to Zambia for eventual attack on Rhodesia.

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26 August New Ambassador to Ethiopia Buenaventura Reyes Acosta presents credentials to Chairman Mengistu in Addis Ababa.

27 August Mozambican Deputy Minister of National Defense Armando Emilio Gueboza heads military delegation arriving in Cuba at the invitation of Raul Castro. Greeted by Division General Senen Casas Regueiro.

 US Congressman Preger of House Assassinations Committee arrives in Havana to hear Cuban testimony concerning the assassination of President Kennedy.

 Zimbabwe African National Union leader Mugabe interviewed in Dar es Salaam. He says Cuba has offered material support.

28 August Economic Cooperation Minister Hector Rodriguez meets East German Deputy Premier Gerhard Weiss.

29 August Transportation Minister Antonio Lusson arrives in Tripoli, Libya. Air transportation agreement between the two countries signed on 1 September.

 Division General Senen Casas Regueiro meets Soviet Vice Admiral Sokolov and Lieutenant General Sergey Krivoplyasov, chief of Soviet military experts assigned to Cuba.

30 August Granma criticizes Chinese foreign policy as "reactionary."

31 August A group of Nicaraguans freed from jail as part of the Sandinista operation in Managua, arrives in Havana.

 Cuba and Iraq cosponsor a draft resolution on Puerto Rico in the UN De-colonization Committee.

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